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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000450

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [IS](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARONITE PATRIARCH ADOPTS SOME
ILL-CONSIDERED POSITIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b)

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SUMMARY AND COMMENT

11. (C) In a 3/26 meeting with the Ambassador, the Maronite Patriarch conveyed some surprisingly unhelpful positions regarding Lebanon's political impasse. Patriarch Sfeir, perhaps in an effort to appear strictly neutral to Lebanon's warring political factions, has apparently adopted some convictions that play directly into the hands of the pro-Syrian alliance. In a near-abdication of the patriarch's traditional role as trusted political arbiter for Lebanon's Christians, Sfeir says that he agrees with March 8 leaders Nabih Berri, Michel Aoun and Hassan Nasrallah that only a two-thirds quorum would permit parliament to select the next president. This position would, in effect, give the anti-government alliance a veto over any future president. Similarly, Sfeir was almost indifferent to Speaker Berri's arrogant refusal to allow parliament to convene (because in Berri's opinion, the Siniora government is illegitimate). Lastly, Sfeir placed his best hope for a political settlement of the crisis squarely on this week's Arab Summit in Riyadh. Whether due to extremely poor (and one-sided) advice, or simply showing the fatigue of his 87 years, Sfeir appears to be abandoning his previously well-regarded leadership role in the pro-reform movement. End summary and comment.

12. (C) Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir met with the Ambassador and Special Assistant on March 26 at his headquarters in Bkirki, several miles north of Beirut. The Patriarch was not accompanied by any aides. Throughout the meeting, Sfeir generally agreed with the Ambassador's observations that the situation was serious and required decisive action. But when he was asked about supporting certain pro-reform positions, the elderly cleric simply raised his hands in apparent surrender and stated repeatedly how "terrible" the situation had become.

AN ANXIOUS LEADER

13. (C) On a range of subjects from UNSCR 1701, to the Special Tribunal, to the need for a legitimate presidential election, Patriarch Sfeir appears to have adopted a consistently hands-off approach to the challenges facing his country. Sfeir indicated that he fully understood the seriousness of issues such as Lebanon's problematic border security, but offered little besides empathy and hand-wringing. On the matter of UNSCR 1701 and its requirement for secure borders, the Patriarch agreed that

continued arms smuggling was a critical issue that could result in renewed hostilities if not checked. Yet he also made clear that he would not publicly comment on the matter, despite the visibility and relative immunity he enjoys as the most recognizable religious leader in Lebanon.

14. (C) Likewise, his attitude toward the tribunal was personally sympathetic, but he has remained aloof from the issue in his public comments. He criticized possible GOL recourse to Chapter VII action, saying that such an option could lead to civil strife. Sfeir indicated he would, of course, welcome a Lebanese solution for the establishment of the tribunal, and understood that criminal acts of political violence in Lebanon should not go unpunished. He was clearly unnerved by the possibility that international action may actually be necessary to establish the court. He warned that it would "create discord" between Lebanese, and that Chapter VII was an admission that Lebanon was a "fallen country" unable to govern its own affairs. Borrowing a line from PM Siniora's negotiations toward UNSCR 1701 last summer, he spoke hazily about the possibility of a "Chapter 6 1/2," but then voiced deep concern and uncertainty about whether even that course was desirable. When asked by the Ambassador if there were any way the Lebanese people could be encouraged to establish the tribunal, the Patriarch responded, worriedly, that Syria would simply never allow the court to be established.

PLACES THE BLAME ON ALL

15. (C) Sfeir, when asked if he would speak out against the unconstitutional refusal by Speaker Berri to convene the country's parliament, apportioned the blame for the country's

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political crisis to all the factions. He said the problem wasn't just parliament, but also "the president, the government, and the electoral law." Indicating that his support for the Siniora government has apparently slipped, the Patriarch summarized, "We are in need of total change, otherwise nothing will change."

16. (C) Sfeir then digressed into a discussion of the draft electoral law, which proposes a mix of large (muhafaza) and small (qada) districts. As he explained why he felt the small districting system should be exclusively applied, his general distrust of the draft law became clear. He completed his analysis of the draft law, which sounded suspiciously like it was based on hearing only one side of the issue, with a return to his belief that all the branches of government -- the president, the cabinet, and parliament, in that order -- needed replacing if Lebanon is to move forward.

17. (C) But probably the most unexpected position was his previously undisclosed belief that, in the event of a new presidential election, a two-thirds quorum of the parliament must be present to elect a new president. When it was pointed out that such a requirement bestowed veto power to the March 8-Aoun alliance, the Patriarch simply shrugged and suggested that perhaps this week's Arab Summit could resolve the thorny issue. Even the evident irony of having the heads of foreign states set the rules to choose Lebanon's next president failed to stir Sfeir from his dispirited view that things had simply become "too difficult." (Note: Lebanon's constitution specifies that the parliamentary quorum is a simple majority. There is no special quorum specified for presidential elections. But there is a clause that says, to win on the first ballot, a successful presidential candidate must have the support of two-thirds of the chamber. The March 8-Aoun position is based on the argument that the possibility of a first-ballot victory implies a special two-thirds quorum is needed for presidential elections. It is not a coincidence that the March 14 bloc has a simple majority in the chamber but could not muster a two-thirds quorum to make an election valid. Thus, the March 14 bloc

concludes -- rightly, we believe -- that the March 8-Aoun strategy is to prevent a parliamentary session from being considered valid unless they are assured that the president to be elected is acceptable to the Syrians. End note.)

SYRIAN INFLUENCE

18. (C) Patriarch Sfeir mused that the alliance of FPM leader Michel Aoun with Hizballah had made the situation "more difficult" in Lebanon. He blandly remarked that General Aoun was under the control of Syria, just as much as the overtly pro-Syrian President Lahoud. He spoke of traits that a pro-reform president would require: independence, freedom from corrupt influences, the ability to win the respect of all Lebanon's communities, and most importantly, distance from both the March 14 and March 8-Aoun alliances. But when asked to name individuals who could fit this bill, he again shrugged and bemoaned the current state of "severe polarization" and political stalemate. The Ambassador urged Sfeir to look at the principles March 14 and March 8 stand for: March 14 stands for an independent Lebanon, free from Syrian interference; March 8 wants to hand Lebanon back to Syria. Surely, the Ambassador said, the Patriarch does not see those two positions as being equally valid.

19. (C) Sfeir acknowledged that both Hassan Nasrallah and Nabih Berri want a weak president. He noted that Berri has stated that he would support any candidate the Patriarch would put forth, knowing full well that with the current fractures in the Christian community, that would be impossible. And when confronted with the possibility that anti-reform forces might even create a second government in November to further destabilize the country, the elderly cleric merely stated that such a development would be "shameful." In closing, the Patriarch said he was convinced that Syria would never permit the tribunal to be established and that "some other way" must be found to defuse the current crisis. He assured the Ambassador that he continues to support the tribunal concept, but barring some surprising grand solution at the Arab Summit, he was at a loss on how to get to the tribunal.

COMMENT

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110. (C) Our distress over Patriarch Sfeir's drift into inaction is shared with others. Minister of Social Affairs Nayla Mouawad, suggesting that Sfeir is abdicating the traditional leadership position for himself as well as his fellow Christians, told the Ambassador a few days ago that "the Patriarch is acting like we are Copts, forgetting that we are Maronites!" French Ambassador Emie, stopping by to see the Ambassador after visiting Bkirke, said that he discovered, for the first time, "a confused and lost old man."

111. (C) The most common analysis is that the March 8-Aoun crowd has successfully enveloped Sfeir in an anti-March 14 bubble, by surrounding him with March 8-Aoun visitors and utilizing the pro-Aoun and pro-Syria part of the Maronite clergy. According to this analysis, Sfeir has started to accept the argument that he has to choose between the tribunal and Lebanon and that a simple majority for presidential elections would be harmful to the Christians (when in fact, of course, the two-thirds quorum is promoted by March 8-Aoun forces to give Nabih Berri, Hizballah, and Syria veto power). While he never criticized PM Siniora explicitly, we also sensed a new anti-Siniora bias this time, when Sfeir lumped the government and president together as almost equivalent problems. Mohamed Chatah, Siniora's senior advisor, told the Ambassador that he suspects Sfeir has listened to too many tales of civil service appointments where Maronite views were not taken into account. Asked if

there was accuracy in such tales, Chatah said that many positions are now vacant, unfilled because of the cabinet crisis; the Maronites are now disadvantaged more than other groups. But the appointment of the technically well qualified Kamal Shehadeh -- a Protestant -- as head of the potentially powerful Telecommunications Regulatory Authority has been exploited by March 8 and Aoun forces, Chatah said, as Shehadeh took what would normally be the Maronite seat in an executive body.

¶12. (C) The March 14 supporters recognize that, to counter what seems to amount to a March 8-Aoun sit-in in Bkirke, they, too, must deploy visitors to sit with the Patriarch and explain their views. Time is of the essence: if the Patriarch goes public with his two-thirds quorum requirement for presidential elections or criticism of Siniora over civil service appointments, then the March 14 arguments are greatly weakened in the Christian community. The Patriarch's interpretation on the constitution, for example, would be seen as impossible to criticize. The trouble is the security environment: March 14 cabinet ministers and MPs believe that they are under severe threat and thus do not move as freely as the March 8-Aoun crowd (not counting the Nabih Berri, Hassan Nasrallah, and Michel Aoun).

¶13. (C) We suggest that, to the extent that we can promote contacts with the Patriarch from the Vatican and from others, we emphasize the principles of Lebanese sovereignty and independence. We need to remind the Patriarch constantly the March 14 and March 8 are not simply political movements in Lebanon. They stand for something much greater. One promotes Lebanese sovereignty and independence, while the other hopes to usher back Syrian hegemony and violates UN Security Council resolutions with impunity. That is the best argument, we believe, for waking the Patriarch out of his March 8-Aoun induced stupor. His current position is less than simply unhelpful; he is on the threshold of causing real harm.

FELTMAN